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The role of informal curricula in furthering intercultural dialogue: Internationalisation in a Chinese university

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Abstract

This chapter explores the possibilities and limits of the informal curriculum in promoting intercultural dialogue among students in the context of a specific Chinese university. Through a document analysis of the institution's internationalisation policy and an investigation of the University's informal curriculum linked to internationalisation, this study investigated a group of home and international students' experiences and interpretations vis-à-vis the implementation of this informal curriculum, questioning how far the University environment promotes intercultural dialogue through its internationalisation policy.

Introduction

Higher education in China, like other Asian countries, has undergone extensive reforms due to global transformations brought about by marketisation, commodification, and, more recently, neo-liberal privatisation. Furthermore, after China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001, the organisation's rules, standards, and principles exerted an ever-expanding influence on the management of higher education (Huang, 2006; Mok & Lo, 2007). Policies relating to these transformations have been written into the policy documents for China's higher education through which Chinese universities enact their strategic planning to encourage competition and benchmarking with world-class academic institutions (Mok, 2007). The ability to produce university graduates who are capable of communicating appropriately in a globalised society

gives a competitive edge to players within the higher education realm. Seeking this advantage, the administrators of China's universities are endeavouring to expand enrolments of high-quality students, raise the quality of their institutions' teaching and research, and improve service functions in an effort to compete internationally and gain a higher position within the world university rankings (Ngok & Guo, 2007).

Xu's (2010) review of top Chinese universities' strategic efforts in the face of the major challenges of internationalisation reveals their ambition to create a cross-cultural community which can compete alongside world-class universities, thus avoiding the loss of talented students. Xu further highlights the importance of counterbalancing the number of student 'imports' and 'exports' so as to expose non-mobile home students to a diversified cultural scenario, and subsequently reinforce mutual understanding and intercultural communication between both groups.

In this context, the current study explores the internationalisation policies and informal curriculum of a high-ranking Chinese university undergoing internationalisation. Using a phenomenological lens, the study investigates how institutional support and activities associated with the informal curriculum can promote—or fail to promote—all students' intercultural learning and communication. We analyse home and international students' reflections on their intercultural communication experiences on campus and in the local environment to examine the implementation and impact of the University's internationalisation policy. From this analysis we aim to provide recommendations to this university—and more generally, to higher education institutions that are internationalising—on which institutional practices encourage intercultural contact and develop intercultural dialogue (ICD) among the student population.

An intercultural dialogue approach to internationalisation of higher education

Intercultural dialogue, as a strategic goal, has been integrated into higher education internationalisation policy in Europe, and has gained prime importance in terms of managing cultural diversity on campus (Castro, Woodin, Lundgren & Byram, 2016; Woodin, Lundgren, & Castro, 2011). We are guided by the commonly cited White Paper definition of ICD to make sense of intercultural experience in the context of our study:

Intercultural dialogue is understood as a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 46).

This definition highlights the importance of the processual aspect of communication, and it also focuses on communication among peers, e.g., university students, where there are differences. The outcome should be open and respectful exchange across equal relationships.

However, Hoskins and Sallah (2011), drawing on their research with young people in higher education in the European context, point out that this approach may be limited as it fails to acknowledge the economic and other forms of difference beyond cultural and linguistic differences, e.g., social class and educational background. Given that these social and economic differences also exist among students in Chinese higher education institutions, this criticism may also be salient to these institutions. They also critique the methods and techniques that have emerged out of the White Paper policy on ICD such as communicative activities that involve group work. They argue that these techniques may enhance interpersonal skills at the individual level, but such intercultural encounters may not be sufficient to generate the structural change necessary to address intercultural conflict. Acknowledging this critique to intercultural dialogue, in this study we, too, seek to identify gaps within this university's policy initiatives aimed at improving students' intercultural communication at social and institutional levels, as the discourse and theoretical understanding of 'intercultural dialogue' and 'barriers' may be different from those of the Council of Europe, due to the institutional environment (Risager & Tranekjaer, 2020, this volume).

In the context of internationalisation, Bergan and Restoueix (2009) state that such ICD activities are a *sine qua non* if a university is to perform its fundamental remit to internationalise successfully. Accordingly, in promoting ICD universities concentrate mainly on: 1) the support that the university administration accords to students by providing them with information on practical problems, accommodation, study guidance, the various permits they may need, and, sometimes, pastoral care; 2) linguistic support

through training courses in the host country's language and measures that facilitate students' adjustment to the teaching methods of the given country. However, they argue that such measures are limited in that they offer practical bases only for international students' adjustment, and intercultural communication at a preliminary level only. These two strategies are unlikely to ensure effective and ongoing intercultural dialogue. Furthermore, the focus is on incoming (international) students only, and not on promoting an equal and respectful relationship through dialogue across all groups.

The lack of a focus on ICD is evident in areas of internationalisation generally, and especially in the Chinese context. However, while conceptual ideas linked to other policies such as 'internationalisation at home' or 'internationalisation of the curriculum' have made their way into the strategic plans of a growing number of universities in Europe and beyond (Beelen, 2011; Jones, 2009), these ideas have not necessarily been implemented into internationalisation policies in Chinese universities. Generally, obstacles to their implementation are a lack of involvement of academic staff and expertise to draw a meaningful intercultural and international dimension into higher education curricula (Beelen, 2011). These problems have also, in turn, driven higher education institutions in China, especially the country's leading universities, to launch effective policies in four key areas: first, to attract international students from diverse ethnic backgrounds from around the world who can improve the English proficiency and intercultural understanding of home students; second, to enhance the welfare and working conditions for academics to integrate talented faculty from both at home and abroad (Chen, 2011); third, to draw on effective teaching methods, materials, and administrative patterns from Western countries that are compatible with Chinese teaching and learning conventions (Huang, 2003); and finally, to cultivate global citizens who are not only capable of conducting scientific research, but also of communicating and behaving effectively in a globalised society (Huang, 2006).

While these policy developments may be laudable, evidence from research indicates a downtrend in terms of personal interaction between students from different cultural backgrounds in all major countries hosting large numbers of international students (Summers & Volet, 2008). Factors identified as impeding students' intercultural contact in a multicultural environment include language barriers, common stereotypes, and poor intercultural relational skills (Kimmel & Volet, 2010). In addition, previous research on the internationalisation of higher

education has been criticised for its over-emphasis on the output dimensions of internationalisation policy, such as the number of joint research programmes and students studying abroad (Beerkens, Brandenburg, Evers, Van Gaalan, Lerchsenring, & Zimmermann, 2010), or on economic benefits and partnerships established as a result of internationalisation strategies (Deardorff & van Gaalen, 2012), which is largely a matter of instrumental economic thinking, so can be fundamentally misguided (Byram, 2020, this volume). Issues relating to the effectiveness of internationalisation policy—and policy responses in the form of interventions—on students' development of intercultural knowledge and skills have rarely been addressed (Deardorff & van Gaalen, 2012). Thus, there is a need to investigate the effectiveness of strategic efforts that seek to promote such knowledge and skills; and more importantly, our task here, to investigate how effective such policies—and the interventions that emerge out of them—are in bringing about intercultural contact with the aim of establishing ICD among all students. This study attempts to address these issues through an investigation of an implemented informal curriculum, and the extent to which the curriculum is successful, or not, in bringing about intercultural dialogue.

The role of informal curricula in developing intercultural dialogue

In a study that explored the combined effects of formal and informal curricula in enhancing the levels of interaction between international and home students, Leask (2009) argued that students' lived intercultural experiences are shaped by the interplay of both formal and informal curricula, that is, the teaching and learning processes, content, and experiences in and out of the classroom. Leask defined the informal curriculum as "various extracurricular or optional activities that take place on campus, which, in many ways, define the culture of the campus and thus are an important part of the landscape in which the formal curriculum is enacted" (p. 207). Furthermore, a study by Gu, Schweisfurth and Day (2010) highlighted the ways in which international students' intercultural experiences affect evaluation of the quality of academic provision, language proficiency, provision of institutional support, and how social contacts impact the level of students' personal development and academic achievements. To date, there is a lack of research in the Chinese context into students' experiences and perceptions of the informal curriculum (as evidenced in policy statements), and in particular, research which has adopted an ICD approach.

Therefore, we extend Leak's (2009) study to explore how the implementation of an informal curriculum in one Chinese university can support ICD between home and international students in the context of the internationalisation of higher education in China. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1: To what extent do the internationalisation policies of a high-ranking university in China promote intercultural dialogue among home and international students?

2: What informal curriculum does the university implement to foster intercultural dialogue across the student body? How do students experience and perceive the curriculum in enabling intercultural dialogue?

The methodology of the study

The university under study (the University) is located in a large city in China and takes a leading role among China's renowned universities in initiating and implementing the higher education internationalisation process. The study, undertaken by the first author, entailed an initial analysis of the document sources of the University's public website as the raw data to identify mission statements, supportive strategies, and events that purport to improve home and international students' intercultural dialogue. This analysis identified some areas for further inquiry regarding the students' perspectives on the University's specific institutional support and activities, but also enabled examination of the relationship between students' intercultural experiences and the University's internationalisation goals.

To explore students' experiences of the University's informal curriculum, 15 Chinese master's students and 15 international students (aged from 20 to 25) were recruited from the University for this case study. Access was gained to the potential participants through face-to-face contact with programme directors. The international participants were students from eight different countries, either enrolled in an exchange programme or in short language courses (i.e., non-credit-bearing courses). Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes and were undertaken with international students in English and/or Chinese (those whose first language was not English), and with home students in Chinese. Where Chinese was the interview language, we have included the Chinese version in the text to acknowledge the Chinese speakers' voices. The study

received ethical approval from Durham University, and all students were informed of the ethics and consent processes and agreed to participate in the study.

Thematic analysis was the main method of data analysis for both the policy documents and the semi-structured interviews, given its flexibility across a range of theoretical assumptions and research questions, and its compatibility with constructionist paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, a semantic approach was chosen, as the process of analysis was to move from description to interpretation by seeking out the implications within the surface meaning of the data in both the policy documents and interview accounts. Researcher objectives were to align the understanding of participants' narrative accounts and reflections relating to the University's informal curriculum, and how it promotes, or not, intercultural dialogue.

The University's internationalisation policy

In terms of promoting ICD two key themes emerged from the document analysis of the University's internationalisation policies: the role of administration in promoting extracurricular (intercultural) activities within the informal curriculum; and student mobility (attracting international students, and sending home students abroad).

The administration system, represented by the Office of International Relations, is responsible for implementing the University's internationalisation policy through the informal curriculum which aims to support the integration processes of international students and expose international and home students to one another. According to the website, the University is committed to and prioritises the organising of on-campus extracurricular activities that are culture oriented; and cultural excursions to facilitate international students' exposure to the new social and cultural environment, and to local nationals. The Office organises orientation programmes for newly-recruited international students, and provides advice on practical matters concerning residency in China (e.g., physical examinations; immigration information sessions; and residence permit procedures), and language assistance. These processes accord with Bergan and Restoueix's (2009) identification of endeavours to promote intercultural dialogue. Furthermore, Woodin et al (2011), in their framework for promoting ICD, highlight the importance of such programmes in facilitating ICD and the important role of the students who are part of the ICD process.

The second theme addresses student mobility. The University's internationalisation policy outlines the aim to increase the demographic diversity of the student body to develop all-round talents (students) with global perspectives. To attract more international students, the University provides English-taught programmes across various disciplines, especially in the natural sciences. However, Leask (2010) argues that increasing international students does not necessarily result in intercultural contact, and possibly risks overlooking the intercultural experience and international learning outcomes of home students. A further strategy aims to send home students abroad to develop their international experience, for example, to: participate in degree and exchange programmes; engage in joint education and research activities; undertake summer internships; and attend international conferences. Other forms of internationalisation include fostering partnerships with prestigious research institutions and enterprises abroad; and developing talent training programmes on the home campus to prepare home students for overseas exchange programmes.

However, these policy initiatives relate to another pillar of higher education internationalisation—internationalisation abroad; they do not necessarily foster ICD and integration between home and international students, an aspect also addressed by Clarke and Yang (2020, this volume) in their analysis of Ireland's national strategy document.

A study by Leask (2010), although contextualised within universities in the United Kingdom, showed that international students were dissatisfied with the lack of integration with home students, resulting in their feeling isolated, which in turn affects their overall competence development and international experience (Middlehurst & Woodfield, 2007). The mismatch between what is said (i.e., the official documents) and what is done also corresponds to Woodin et al. (2011), this inspired our examination of the extent to which institutional activities foster ICD between home and international students—the focus of our second research question and the next section.

Students' experiences of informal curricula in fostering intercultural dialogue

In line with Leask's definition of 'informal curriculum' and the policy initiatives discussed above, we present the strategies and activities implemented by the University that we believe may

promote (or not) opportunities for ICD among students. We draw on interview data—primarily from international students—where they discussed their experiences and perceptions of five main activities taking place within the informal curriculum. From their experiences we draw conclusions concerning the informal curriculum in fostering ICD among all students.

Residential arrangements

Responses from most of the international participants indicated that their expectation to expand intercultural relations with home students was rarely acknowledged in the University's administration practice. The residential arrangements appeared to be the major barrier that prevented international students from engaging with home students outside of the classroom. As Kaho remarked:

Because I am living in the Global Village [name of international students' accommodation building], where there are also no Chinese people, I also don't think that is good for me to improve my Chinese. I mean I can communicate with other international students, which also helps me broaden my horizons. But most of the students living in the Global Village share their room with other international students, not Chinese people. (Kaho)

This finding resonates with Leask's (2007) study conducted in Australia, Hong Kong, and Singapore, which found that international students are disappointed by the lack of opportunity to engage with home students, particularly through residential arrangements.

These views were echoed by the Chinese participants in this study. In being on an internationalised campus, many aspired to communicate and integrate with international students in residential contexts. They viewed this engagement as indispensable in improving their English and acquiring intercultural awareness.

The Language Partner Programme

The Language Partner Programme, the participants' most frequently mentioned institutional activity, was widely practised across the campus. Most non-Chinese participants considered this programme as an effective way of practising and improving Chinese, and becoming acquainted

with the customs and life styles of Chinese people:

Through conversations and meeting my language buddies, I am able to learn more about their life styles, their own habits and customs, how they go about their lives, why they study, what they are studying, for the future, like one of my language buddies, she is getting a PhD in Biomedical Engineering because she wants a good job. It's not something you can learn in the textbook. (Christina)

This student's experience aligns with Clifford's (2009) claim that a key to improving intercultural interaction and international experiences is the link between informal learning and the more formal learning in the classroom as they involve both international and home students and therefore both groups benefit, resulting in a 'win-win' effect.

The International Cultural Festival

Another popular activity was the International Cultural Festival which offered first-hand experience of otherness, providing a platform for many students to participate and share their cultures and traditions, by, for example, daring one another to taste food and join in the singing and dancing. The festival was highly appreciated by both international and Chinese students:

When I first arrived at China, I think the most helpful activity was the International Cultural Festival, which acquainted me with not only other Russian students, but also students from a diversity of countries. (Dasha)

While this event contributed to increased exposure between home and international students, the participants remained doubtful about whether it would lead to real integration and internationalisation. Although enjoyable, some were sceptical about its focus on superficial manifestations of culture:

我们有一个文化节, 但是那个很短, 就一天, 会有各个国家的人每个国家有一个展位, 展示自己国家的有意思的东西啊, 或者也可以做自己国家的美食, 那个活动很大, 但是因为它是一个展示性质的, 所以你就是走一圈, 各个国家都看一看, 并没有特别深的交流。(李)

The International Cultural Festival lasts for only 1 day. Each country had its own booth to show foods, clothes or other things that may symbolise their own country. However, the festival was in itself an exhibition, which means you could merely catch a glimpse of the booth of each country. Except for that, you might not even get a chance to have an intense conversation with students from other countries.
(Li, Chinese student)

Li's perspective was widely shared by other Chinese participants, many of whom began to show doubt about the effectiveness of the International Cultural Festival as a way of promoting communication with international students.

The Speech Contest

In addition to the Language Partner Programme and the International Cultural Festival, both Chinese and international participants spoke highly of the Speech Contest in promoting communication between international students from the same class, who might otherwise not come into contact:

The good thing about the Speech Contest is that because everybody has to participate, you end up working with the Japanese students and the Korean students who you might otherwise not necessarily spend time with or socialise with. Because when you spend more time with people from different cultures you observe them and you see they laugh at this, but they don't laugh at that; they behave like this, but they don't behave like that. I think from that, just from what you see, and what you hear, that helps you understand more about their culture. (George)

This finding resonates with Thom's (2010) study which explored the perceived value that participants gave to 'getting out of their own cultural groups', which he claimed was the forerunner that led to learning new ways of interacting, performing better, and seeing value in learning from each other. The participants' accounts also concur with Volet and Ang's (1998) study by indicating that people's perceptions of each other and of the 'other' can be dispelled through active experience of working together and coming to know individuals as real people.

The Western Students' Union

International participants indicated that they were keen to participate in the Western Students

Union as it is an international organisation that facilitates communication between students from diverse ethnic groups. As Christina mentioned:

At the university there are ... the Malaysia Students' Union, Korean Students' Union, all these different unions, but the Western Students' Union is very active; they include people from all over the place. So, by being part of that group, you are introduced to people from all over the place, and you get to know them, and the different cultures they come from. (Christina)

Intensive exposure to diverse viewpoints and perspectives provided space for the international participants to renegotiate their personal and cultural selves in intercultural settings. However, the participants expressed their concern over the Union's appeal to Chinese students:

There are opportunities [for ICD], but the big Western students' association groups...don't accommodate Chinese students, and most of the activities organised by the association are about going to the pubs or having [a] pizza party. Rarely were Chinese students interested in these. (Matthew)

Thus, even though positive value was ascribed to the role that the Western Students Union played in integrating students from diverse cultural backgrounds, its social activities did not resonate with the socialisation practices of Chinese students. As a result, some of the international students did not perceive the Western Students Union as helpful in enabling relationships to form with host students.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have explored the extent to which the internationalisation policy of a key university in China can promote ICD. Secondly, we have examined the role of the informal curriculum in fostering ICD across the student body, and students' perceptions and experiences of this informal curriculum. From this analysis we draw conclusions about the University's internationalisation strategy in fostering ICD among all students.

Our thematic analysis of the policy documents illustrates the commitment of the University's administration, particularly the Office of International Relations, to implement activities via an informal curriculum. This action aligns with Bergan and Restoueix's (2009) guidelines that

universities can adopt to promote ICD. By contrast, the strategy to increase the presence of international students on campus and to send home students abroad suggested the University's lack of strategic planning to promote ICD among all students. This finding corresponds to the call within the literature to incorporate home students' intercultural learning and communication experiences into the higher education internationalisation research agenda (Carrol & Ryan, 2005; Trahar, 2011), and to introduce practical schemes such as mentoring that enhance intercultural encounters for both groups (Leask, 2010). We highlight the risks associated with an overemphasis on increasing international student numbers which, as this study indicates, may result in overlooking home students' lived intercultural experience on campus and the dynamics and complexity of intercultural communication among all students. As Golubeva (2020, this volume) states, responsible university management should take care not only of numbers and statistic indicators of internationalisation, but of creating intercultural dialogue. The quality of international learning outcomes may also be affected, e.g., the creation of Chinese students as global or international talents (a broader Chinese governmental aim linked to internationalisation in higher education).

The second research question sought to understand how students experienced and perceived the University's informal curriculum in furthering their opportunities for ICD. According to the international students, most of the extracurricular activities helped to develop their knowledge of other countries, through intentionally planned interventions such as the International Culture Festival and the Speech Contest. However, engagement with home students appeared less successful. Apart from the Language Partner Programme, the activities promoted contact among international students themselves, rather than increased opportunities for ICD between home and international students. For example, the Western Students' Union was considered "Western"-oriented, and unlikely to accommodate the socialisation practices of Chinese students.

Our findings revealed that the intercultural activities were limited to surface level intercultural communication, lending support to Leask's (2007) study which highlighted a gulf between internationalisation-at-home policies and the limited intercultural communication taking place among international and home student groups. In a further study, Leask (2009) argued that internationalised university experiences cannot easily be engendered by simply increasing casual exposure between home and international students. The findings, therefore, constitute a

response to Montgomery's (2010) call for tasks and activities that engage all students in intercultural interaction, and which give meaning and authenticity to the students' intercultural communication in personal and academic contexts.

Finally, this study enriches Leask's (2009) definition of the informal curriculum by incorporating students' experiences with residential arrangements. Both groups criticised the residential arrangements, which they perceived segregated international and Chinese students. These findings suggest a gap between the institutional rhetoric of internationalisation and practice associated with the University's administration, especially concerning accommodation arrangements (see Porto, 2020, this volume, for a discussion of this discrepancy).

Implications for internationalisation in Chinese universities

This study highlights the importance of an intercultural informal curriculum in the context of a Chinese university that has been internationalised, and thus, offers important implications for other Chinese universities engaging in internationalisation.

The outcomes of our study corroborate findings from Leask's (2010) study: mere exposure to another cultural environment or being present in a multicultural and multilingual community does not guarantee that intercultural dialogue will take place. Therefore, importance should be attached to cultural inclusiveness within the educational environment, which, according to McLoughlin (2011), entails the recognition and valuing of cultural diversity, and enables the views of all students to be expressed, thus creating the university as a place of epistemological and ontological openness and diversity (Parmenter et al., 2020, this volume) and contributing to increased acceptance of and interactions among students from diverse cultures (Thompson & Byrnes, 2011). Therefore, Chinese universities should implement policies and informal curricular that nurture a welcoming, tolerant, and culturally inclusive environment to meet the physical and psychological expectations and goals of both international and home students to promote inclusive policies that reflect the diversity of all the actors involved (Ortiz et al., 2020, this volume). To achieve this objective and develop intercultural learning, we highlight the value of materials developed within projects such as 'Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers' (IEREST, 2015), which support students in benefiting from their international experiences (Holmes, Bavieri, & Ganassin, 2015) through its teaching resources linked to interculturality, e.g., within the informal curriculum (see Borghetti and Zanoni's study,

2020, this volume).

Our study also highlights the importance of internationalisation of the informal curriculum to other audiences, e.g., university administration. In the Chinese higher education context, policy makers should attend to the role that these units play in delivering the informal curriculum (Leask & Beelen, 2009), especially the professional demand to adapt to the needs and goals of a diverse student body. To this end, management should include people mandated to deal with internationalisation and cultural diversity matters, and intercultural training should also be introduced to stimulate professionals' awareness of interculturality in these administrative departments, which entails active and critical involvement of HE staff, officials and management in the process (Castro et al.; Deardorff and Woodin, 2020, this volume).

Finally, our study highlights the need for combined formal and informal strategic efforts when implementing and delivering an internationalisation policy. Any interventions, such as the implementation of informal curricular activities, must be carefully guided and monitored by well-trained teachers and educators, who are theoretically and pedagogically competent to help students to process their intercultural experiences (Lundgren, 2020, this volume), to ensure that intercultural learning and ICD are fostered. Studies of implemented intercultural programmes which provide guided intercultural learning and encounters during students' study abroad periods have been highly effective (Beaven & Golubeva, 2016; Holmes, Bavieri, & Ganassin, 2015).

Research limitations and directions for further research

This study investigated international and home students' experiences of an informal curriculum in fostering ICD in a Chinese university. The study showed that intercultural matters relating to internationalisation policy are not limited to student groups. Representing the voices, stories, and perspectives of others (e.g., university administrators, curriculum developers, tutors, programme directors, and other academic staff) would provide a richer understanding of the effectiveness of a university's internationalisation policy in supporting students' intercultural communication, and thus, the potential for fostering intercultural dialogue. These voices should be taken into account in future research to ensure consistency in understandings across a university's policy initiatives and students' individual experiences. In addition, having a more balanced sample (which includes home and international students, administrators and other

officers, and academic staff) might enable future studies to more reliably investigate responses to an institution's informal curriculum and its potential to foster ICD.

Second, owing to the subjectivity of the participants' perceptions, the research findings may not have accurately reflected participants' perceptions of cultural others and the institutional system. Accordingly, conducting further research that includes those in direct contact with international students (e.g., course leaders, tutors, and programme directors) is desirable as a broader study might either support or contradict participants' experiences and perceptions articulated in this study. Furthermore, research based on participant observation would be complementary in exploring the possible discrepancy between participants' retrospective responses and their observed daily intercultural communication behaviour.

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